

**This is my message to the western world –  
your civilisation is killing life on Earth**

**Nemonte Nenquimo**

We Indigenous people are fighting to save the Amazon, but the whole planet is in trouble because you do not respect it

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Waorani leader Nemonte Nenquimo shows evidence of crude oil contamination in the northern Ecuadorian Amazon rainforest.

Photograph: Mitch Anderson / Amazon Frontlines

Dear presidents of the nine Amazonian countries and to all world leaders that share responsibility for the plundering of our rainforest,

My name is Nemonte Nenquimo. I am a Waorani woman, a mother, and a leader of my people. The Amazon rainforest is my home. I am writing you this letter because the [fires are raging still](#). Because the corporations are

[spilling oil in our rivers](#). Because the [miners are stealing gold](#) (as they have been for 500 years), and leaving behind open pits and toxins. Because the land grabbers are [cutting down primary forest](#) so that the cattle can graze, plantations can be grown and the white man can eat. Because our elders are [dying from coronavirus](#), while you are planning your next moves to cut up our lands to stimulate an economy that has never benefited us. Because, as Indigenous peoples, we are fighting to protect what we love – our way of life, our rivers, the animals, our forests, life on Earth – and it's time that you listened to us.

## **Goldmining having big impact on indigenous Amazon communities**

In each of our many hundreds of different languages across the Amazon, we have a word for you – the outsider, the stranger. In my language, WaoTededo, that word is “cowori”. And it doesn't need to be a bad word. But you have made it so. For us, the word has come to

mean (and in a terrible way, your society has come to represent): the white man that knows too little for the power that he wields, and the damage that he causes.

You are probably not used to an Indigenous woman calling you ignorant and, less so, on a platform such as this. But for Indigenous peoples it is clear: the less you know about something, the less value it has to you, and the easier it is to destroy. And by easy, I mean: guiltlessly, remorselessly, foolishly, even righteously. And this is exactly what you are doing to us as [Indigenous peoples](#), to our rainforest territories, and ultimately to our planet's climate.

It took us thousands of years to get to know the [Amazon rainforest](#). To understand her ways, her secrets, to learn how to survive and thrive with her. And for my people, the Waorani, we have only known you for 70 years (we were “contacted” in the 1950s by American evangelical missionaries), but we are fast learners, and you are not as complex

as the rainforest.

When you say that the oil companies have marvellous new technologies that can sip the oil from beneath our lands like hummingbirds sip nectar from a flower, we know that you are lying because we live [downriver from the spills](#). When you say that the Amazon is not burning, we do not need satellite images to prove you wrong; we are [choking on the smoke of the fruit orchards](#) that our ancestors planted centuries ago. When you say that you are urgently looking for climate solutions, yet continue to build a world economy based on extraction and pollution, we know you are lying because [we are the closest to the land](#), and the first to hear her cries.

An illegally lit fire in an Amazon rainforest reserve, in Para State, Brazil. Photograph: Carl de Souza/AFP/Getty Images

I never had the chance to go to university, and become a doctor, or a lawyer, a politician, or a

scientist. My elders are my teachers. The forest is my teacher. And I have learned enough (and I speak shoulder to shoulder with my Indigenous brothers and sisters across the world) to know that you have lost your way, and that you are in trouble (though you don't fully understand it yet) and that your trouble is a threat to every form of life on Earth.

You forced your civilisation upon us and now look where we are: global pandemic, climate crisis, species extinction and, driving it all, widespread spiritual poverty. In all these years of taking, taking, taking from our lands, you have not had the courage, or the curiosity, or the respect to get to know us. To understand how we see, and think, and feel, and what we know about life on this Earth.

### **'Total destruction': why fires are tearing across South America**

I won't be able to teach you in this letter, either. But what I can say is that it has to do with thousands and thousands of years of love

for this forest, for this place. Love in the deepest sense, as reverence. This forest has taught us how to walk lightly, and because we have listened, learned and defended her, she has given us everything: water, clean air, nourishment, shelter, medicines, happiness, meaning. And you are taking all this away, not just from us, but from everyone on the planet, and from future generations.

It is the early morning in the Amazon, just before first light: a time that is meant for us to share our dreams, our most potent thoughts. And so I say to all of you: the Earth does not expect you to save her, she expects you to respect her. And we, as Indigenous peoples, expect the same.

- Nemonte Nenquimo is cofounder of the Indigenous-led nonprofit organisation Ceibo Alliance, the first female president of the Waorani organisation of Pastaza province and one of Time's 100 most influential people in the world